

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Emily Sutherland, *The Paraclete Conundrum* (FeedARead Publishing, 2012)

The Paraclete Conundrum is the creative component of a PhD thesis, 'Framing the Portrait', by Emily Sutherland, which examines the part of invention an author can introduce in a historical novel. Sutherland states that 'History and historical novels are linked by a common element, namely that events from the past are presented as a narrative within a literary form.' Therefore the basis of a historical novel must stem from actual personalities or places and the writer of such a novel 'is obliged to make more than a passing reference to the truth', exercising his or her imagination and creativity.

In this novel, the author uses well-known historical characters all of whom lived in the second half of the twelfth century and sets the story inside the 'Paraclete', an abbey near Troyes in France which had been founded by Pierre Abélard. The characters are Hildegard of Bingen, an abbess, Héloïse (of Abélard fame), also an abbess and Eleanor (real name Aliénor) Queen of Aquitaine and of France, and Bernard de Clairvaux, an abbot. The author weaves a story based on topical themes of the time such as the status of women and the question of religious intolerance. Thus in one fell swoop she makes the novel pertinent to the modern age. However, to what extent she can interfere in the veracity of the historical times is the question. In her thesis the author asks: 'Could the three [women] have ever met?' This is precisely where the author intervenes. She develops a credible plot within the historical truth by making the three women meet for a particular reason which becomes the central part of the novel. A letter is at the centre of the intrigue which develops slowly through philosophical and religious discussions between the three women and there are also some discussions between Abélard and Bernard de Clairvaux as reported by the latter. There is an excellent scene of latent dramatic impact during a meal in the abbey, followed by the sickness of the putative villain of the piece, Bernard de Clairvaux, but that potential does not develop fully until later. Apart from the central intrigue created by the letter and the meeting, the author has by and large kept faithfully to historical truths, but further revelation here might spoil the dénouement for the reader.

The book is divided fairly equally between the three women, each one relating the problem created within the plot from her own point of view and thus somewhat differently from the others, or adding a point hitherto not mentioned by the other two. Towards the end, there is a smaller section given to Bernard de Clairvaux. As each woman, narrating in the first person, attempts to resolve the author's contrived problem in a different way, her life and personality, both based on historical facts, are revealed.

The author has obviously done a great deal of research on mediaeval life and the narrative is peppered with historical anecdotes. For example, we are given an insight into mediaeval monastic life and its often useful integration with the outside world. There is a rich description of the various uses of plants for medicinal purposes, including a recipe using cinnamon with other ingredients to heal a liver complaint, we read of what must have been the arduousness of travel. The author has Hildegard travel from Bingen in Germany to Troyes in France as she seeks out Héloïse's wisdom to deal with the problem on which the story is based. We are treated to some of Hildegard's verses. We read of her uncertain childhood and of her fear of being locked up. We learn how she would have loved to ride a horse with her cloak spread across the horse's rump, as was done by knights and noble men and women (and portrayed in the Duke of Berry's 'Book of Hours'.) Hildegard was aware of the need to improve the standard of hygiene by obtaining running water in the abbey, she had modern

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ideas in her approach to drainage around a building and on how to keep waste water away from a stream whose water was used for domestic purposes.

Héloïse, abbess of Paraclete, is shown not only as a gentle and refined woman of mild character but also as a great scholar and thinker. We are given details of her life with and love for Abélard and of her great suffering brought about through her association with him. She is also forward-looking when it comes to modernising her abbey.

Eleanor, wife of King Louis VII and thus queen of France, is the intruder in this story, in that she does not fit in, either by position or temperament. She comes to Paraclete from Paris, as she too wishes to seek advice from Héloïse. She is a woman of action. Although not unreligious, she has little time for saintliness and is not bogged down by the endless recourse to prayer which is the problem-solving method advocated by the two nuns. Eleanor's life as queen is totally out of kilter with the lives of the two other women. A woman of the world, she is of child-bearing age and must produce a male heir, but she is unhappily married to a man who would rather say his prayers than have sex with his wife. She lives a worldly life in a castle surrounded by whatever luxuries might have been available in the Middle Ages and she is not afraid to speak her mind. We are party to a description of her travels as she accompanied her husband on the ill-fated second Crusade to Jerusalem and we have an account of her near-death at sea.

Despite their differences, the three women agree to disagree. The problem is finally solved through the intervention of each woman in turn, in her own way, or so they think. Even a perspicacious and historically informed reader could not guess at the conundrum suggested in the title of the work.

The book has not been well edited for publication and the rather too numerous infelicities should have been found and corrected. Nevertheless, we have here a gently religious mediaeval novel in which the author has intervened with fiction in a masterly manner. This intriguing work, dealing with topical themes will keep the reader interested and guessing to the end.

Etiennette Fennell